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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000078

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ASSESSING PROGRESS ON ELECTIONS

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Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. With April elections drawing ever nearer and the deadline for voter registration at the end of January, USAID elections partners remain pessimistic, though IFES notes that completion of the voter registration exercise on time is not entirely impossible. INEC continues to maintain that the process is moving forward without a hitch, though the INEC representative at this week's PDP retreat met with a critical response from participants to his optimistic assessment. IRI believes PDP emerged from the December convention weakened by internal disagreements and is now therefore more likely to resort to illegal means to ensure its victory. The IRI representative posited, however, that a weakened PDP and a groundswell of popular support for Buhari could actually embolden INEC to act independently to ensure a free and fair election after all. END SUMMARY.

INEC REMAINS OPTIMISTIC, BUT CANDIDATES REBUFF CLAIMS

12. (SBU) In a presentation at the PDP Retreat on January 10, an unidentified INEC representative (reading a paper that INEC Chairman Iwu had been scheduled to deliver) maintained preparations for the elections remain on track. The official told participants that 40,000 electronic registration machines are currently distributed throughout Nigeria with more to come. (NOTE: This is more than the 34,000 machines INEC has been saying it will need for the elections and has been telling the elections partners it currently has.) The representative stated that INEC will not/not introduce manual registration, maintaining that manual registration would be "unconstitutional and illegal."

13. (SBU) Comments from the PDP candidates in response to the INEC presentation were heated, indicating a high level of frustration. A candidate for the Niger State House of Assembly claimed that only 7,000 people in Niger State are registered. The machines move every five days to a new registration site, he said, but they can only register 25-30 people per day before the batteries run out and they can't finish registering everyone before they move on to the next location. A candidate from Rivers State complained that INEC officials operating the machines are not properly trained.

He maintained one ward in Rivers State had only one registration machine. He pointed out that some areas in his state are accessible only by boat and have no electricity -- these voters are not being registered. Another candidate complained that INEC has no authority to screen candidates, noting that this should be up to the parties.

¶4. (SBU) The INEC representative maintained that the process is going well. He claimed "many of the registration machines sit idle because a majority of those wanting to register have already done so." According to INEC, the registration sites enroll 200-300 people per day. In addition, areas along the rivers are fully covered and all sites have been supplied with generators. He added that the registration process had started early in some areas along the delta because conditions for registration are more difficult.

ELECTIONS PARTNERS PESSIMISTIC, BUT NOT WITHOUT HOPE

¶5. (C) In a January 11 meeting with USAID elections partners, IFES told the Ambassador that recent INEC claims that 30 million voters have been registered are "possible," but whether the figure is actually plausible or not depends heavily on when additional electronic registration machines were deployed, the efficiency with which they are working, and whether registration sites remained open over the holidays. It was noted that after all voters have registered, the list must still be downloaded, merged and allotted properly to states and local government areas (LGAs) before it can be considered completed. IFES indicated that it remains possible to meet the January 31 deadline; however, it will require the registration of more than 30 million additional voters in just three weeks.

¶6. (C) IFES stressed that a credible voter registration list
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provides the fundamental basis for a credible election. The IFES representative noted, however, that Nigerian perceptions of a "credible" list may differ from international perceptions. In particular, IFES believes Nigerians are more disposed to considering almost any list to be credible, owing in large part to an overwhelming desire for a transition of power in May. Credible elections also depend on a well administered election day; however, the IFES representative was pessimistic, indicating that the INEC is not only failing to meet minimum acceptable standards but that there appear to be no plans in place to attempt to meet them. The IRI representative said the preliminary statement from the November IRI/NDI observers team had to be softened prior to its release due to fears INEC would no longer cooperate with IRI if released as originally drafted. The final report has been finalized and should be released in the coming week.

BUHARI VS. YAR'ADUA - THE RACE IS ON

¶7. (C) There was general agreement among elections partners that the race is between Buhari and Yar'Adua, with IRI noting that some believe there is a chance Atiku may withdraw and put his support behind Buhari. IRI told the Ambassador if the elections were held today, Buhari would win. Rumors also continue to circulate that the PDP (Obasanjo) may replace Yar'Adua prior to the February 21 deadline for substitutions. IRI reported that Buhari may be concerned that international observers won't be allowed to observe the elections. The IRI representative indicated the PDP had emerged from the December convention weakened because the National Assembly members who did not receive party backing for a second term (those who had not supported Obasanjo's third term bid) will actively campaign against the party. This, he indicated, may make the PDP more likely to resort to illegal methods to influence the outcome. He held out hope that PDP's weakened position and a groundswell of popular support for Buhari may actually embolden INEC to act independently and ensure a

credible election. As the situation stands now, however, he told the Ambassador the elections "cannot be free and fair because of the administration's use and control of government resources."

18. (C) COMMENT. Discordant evaluations of elections preparations to date are not new, nor are they surprising. Hearing from our elections partners that not only is INEC failing to meet basic standards for elections preparation, but that there appear to be no plans in place to try to meet these standards is disturbing. The sense is that, though we haven't reached a point of no return, preparations must be steered back on track soon. Perhaps the biggest obstacle remains the unwillingness of INEC and the GON in general to acknowledge the problem. NGOs and donor countries stand at the ready to provide assistance but are repeatedly told that everything is on track and no help is needed. IRI's contention that overwhelming support for Buhari could embolden INEC to act independently for free and fair elections perhaps makes the valid point that the missing ingredient is merely the political will to perform.
CAMPBELL